

Glwmbgrl1

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The story of Ndu, a traumatised girl with a shaky voice, and a bad secret, who accidentally sparks a revolution.

***“We are all from birth
and throughout life
both vulnerable and
seeking agency.”***

Sue Lyle, 2013, Facebook

Meet the characters:

Ndu: I'm the one that tells this story. Good to meet you! I'm sixteen years old, in Grade 11 – and I'm a MOgeek. I'm very self-conscious about my shaky voice. It is as unpredictable as an earthquake or an earth tremor. I try not to speak out loud if I can help it, but when I do I measure how bad the tremors are on my Voice Richter Scale.

Stylus: She's my bestie. She's the same age as me, and we're in the same class at school. She's also the owner of the Black Swan Dream hair salon, where she braids and cuts hair after school and on weekends.

Geekboy's is my other bestie. He's like my MOgeek brother. We're both obsessed with hacking into cellphones and inventing new things from their parts. He looks the part too!

KFCgull¹: Oh he's only the *lust of my life!* He's also a mozak* with a singing voice to die for, and moves that make me melt. But things between us are....complicated.

The Twins: You'll meet my little brother and sister soon. They're 4 years old. Veliswa and Nqabisile. They're little screen junkies, but man, are they cute.

Mthunzi: My other brother. He was thirteen when he died in a terrible accident six months ago. I don't want to think about that too much right now....you'll meet him in my story.

Mom: She's not that easy to understand these days. But she's my mom.

¹ Credit Evan Haussmann.

Your guide to Glwmbgrl1 Spk

- Black Swan Dream = a hair salon owned by my best friend Stylus, who runs it after school. Unbelievable transformations happen there, that change things in a big way....and I'm not just talking about her incredible braiding and hairdressing talents!
- **MOgeek / Mobile Geek** = a mobile phone nerd. I am one. So is Geekboy.
- **MOgkspk / MOGeekSpeak** = when MOgeeks speak to each other in technical mobile technology terms. Like when Geekboy speaks to me about his mobile/cellphone innovation ideas.
- **MOgkstsh / MOgeekstash** = cellphone parts used to build things, from old broken phones we take apart for parts, to chargers, cables, memory cards and more.
- **MOmshup / MOMashup** = when MOgeeks get together to brainstorm ideas and try out new things by hacking into mobile phones and repurposing mobile phone parts.
- **MOgeekville** = any space where Mogeeks get together and converse using MOgkspk / MOGeekSpeak. When Geekboy and I get together for a MOMashup, we are definitely in the imaginary land of MOgeekville.
- **SMSblitz/SMS blitz** = a competition to sms as fast as possible in SMS language/Txtspk.
- **MOzak** / Music played on a mobile phone
- **MOzak*** / Mobile phone music star [**hence the *, clever huh?**] or mobile-phone music celebrity.
- **MOzak album** = A mobile/cellphone memory card loaded with an album of music. You can load and play this on your mobile/cellphone. Geekboy and I came up with this. We'd read online about Brazilians who do the same with collections of books on memory cards, that hawkers sell in traffic jams. We remixed the idea. Perfect for Africa, with our love of beats – don't you think?

- **MOdj** = a roadside kit used by MOzak*'s when they perform. Pushing buttons on an especially customized mobile phone/cellphone synchs backing beats to singing. A speaker system in a trolley completes the outfit. This gives 'mobile music' or MOzak, as we call it, a whole new spin!
- **Robotrenuers** = hawkers who sell things at traffic lights/robots.
- **Cellphone Evangelist**² = A person who preaches the word of the mobile/cellphone and believes there is a place for txtspk or sms language, as well as for cellphones in classrooms.
- **Voice Richter Scale** = a regular Richter Scale measures for earthquakes and earth tremors, whereas a Voice Richter Scale is a term I invented myself. It refers to how my very own brain measures the crazy earthquakes and tremors in my bizarrely shaky voice.
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General terms used in Glwmbgrl1

FOMO = Fear Of Missing Out

Spotti = a floppy hat

² Copyright Steve Vosloo

Episode 1

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1.

Locust's eyes narrow as he spots me. He's at the centre of that gang of boys my brother Mthunzi used to hang with. There are about 15 of them, all of them carrying sticks, and looking fierce as wild animals. But Locust is the biggest and meanest looking of them all. My heart forgets that it's meant to beat.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see my friend Geekboy waiting for me next to the Vodacom tree up the road. We're meeting there for an after school mogeek mashup. My heart sinks as I realize that in true style he's so busy doing something on his phone that he hasn't noticed me yet.

I'm on my own!

Cloud shadows pass over Locust's face. My breath jams in my chest. I can tell by the look on his face that he clearly wants something from me – and I have a feeling it *is* me. I'm so frightened I can't move. My feet feel like they've been paved into the ground with solid cement.

I can hear small children swinging wildly on the old swings nearby. The rusty chains howl as the kids push the tyre seats faster and faster, higher and higher. The chains start to shriek unbearably.

"Ndu!" Locust shouts my name like a battle cry and suddenly makes his move. He comes towards me fast, reaching for something in his bag! What is he going to pull out? My heart rat-a-tat-tats like a machinegun. It blasts my feet into action, at last.

I'm out of there! I don't hang about for a millisecond. I run blindly.

Baaaaaaaaarp! A taxi hoots and swerves to miss me – just. A dust storm explodes around me as the taxi slams on breaks so close I feel it vacuum suck my hair and clothes towards it.

I blink in shock, then realise I'm looking straight into the taxi's open door. Passengers are staring out at me with mouths wide open, shocked at how close the taxi came to flattening me.

“Are you out of your mind girl?!” the driver yells at me.

I hear footsteps on the dusty road behind me. Running fast towards me! Locust! I scramble inside, breaking my fingernails as I scratch frantically at the door while slamming it shut.

‘Go, go, go!’ I scream at the driver. [Voice Richter Scale: 10.]

The force and strength of my voice takes me by surprise, even though it still comes out in strangled, unregulated bursts.

Baggy eyes that look like they've seen it all meet mine in the rearview mirror. Without blinking she puts her foot down flat on the accelerator.

The taxi's tyres spin in the dust, then grip, and the old engine chokes out thick greasy smoke as we roar away.

I crane my neck to look past the passengers and out the taxi's back window just in time to see Locust throw his *spotti* down on the ground. He kicks it furiously then jumps on top of it and stamps it into the ground.

The taxi's oily fumes rush into my mouth and nose as I suck in my breath. For a moment I think I'm going to hurl.

Geekboy sprints out into the road and after the taxi, his face twisted with worry, one hand up in the air – half a wave and half a question mark. He realizes he can't catch up, and I see him slow down, and put his hands on his head. A second later he reaches for his phone and starts punching buttons.

Everybody in the taxi is jabbering loudly – about me.

I try to lift my hand to wave out the window to Geekboy, to show him I'm fine. But it stops halfway and parks itself firmly over my mouth, holding in feelings and memories pushing up inside my throat. They taste like sour burning vomit.

My phone rings. Geekboy's name and picture come up on my screen.

I can't answer because my whole body starts to shake violently, and I have such bad pins and needles in my hands I can't get my fingers to hit the green telephone. Why is Locust after me? Why?! Soft arms catch me as everything goes black.

2.

Ten minutes later and I'm back in the world of the living. Well, almost. I'm conscious, at least, and I can sit up by myself in a taxi seat. The good news is my fingers are working well enough that I can send a short message to Geekboy.

Ndu: Sry Gkby! Am ok. Wl cht l8.

I point out our shack wedged in the midst of a row of rotten old shacks that lean up against each other like crooked teeth. My escape taxi pulls up right outside.

"You be careful girl!" says the taxi driver as I climb out.

My knees are as wobbly as a Moir's pudding.

"Thank you for saving me." [Voice Richter Scale: 9,5]

When I speak my face burns, my shoulders hunch up towards my head and my voice comes out sounding as weird and broken as it has since...since Mthunzi's accident. But I figure I have to make the effort to speak since my taxi driver's just saved my life *and* gone off her route to drop me at my doorstep.

The taxi driver gives me the thumbs up as she speeds away, leaving me on my own in the taxi's dust.

I unlock the padlock on our shack door. The door moans like a complaining grandmother as I open and close it. Home alone. And half an

hour before I need to fetch my little twin brother and sister from day care. I hook the padlock through the inside bolt and lock myself in.

I've got a few singles stashed in a small plastic container under my mattress. My fingers do a bit of an uncontrollable nervous breakdance as I take one out and light it. Ciggies will kill me. I know. I hardly ever smoke. But right now I need one. It's the only way I know how to blow off some of the off-the-scale stress that's burning me up inside.

My phone rings. It's my best friend Stylus. Geekboy must have told her what happened because we only ever message each other. We never call each other anymore. Not since my voice defected.

"Just tell me you're ok, Ndu," Stylus says.

"I'm OK." My voice breaks worse than ever. [Voice Richter Scale: Variable. 9 – 10]

"You're not. But I'm glad you got home in one piece. I couldn't take it if anything more happened to you."

"Gotta go, Stylus." I sound like a sick animal. [Voice Richter Scale: 9]

"It's ok hon. Just called 'cos it's an emergency. I'll message you later. Love you big time. Bye."

She hangs up. A message from her comes through 10 seconds later.

Stylus: & sms me if u nd anythng!

Ndu: Tx. I will. ☺

I catch a glimpse of myself in our square of mirror hanging from a piece of wire on the wall, clutching my ciggie, arms wrapped across my chest, mouth pursed, and face all screwed up with stress, and realize the ☺ is way off the mark.

What I need is help. I'm in bigger trouble than I know how to handle. And my problems are way too big for Stylus to deal with either. She doesn't know the half of it. It's worse than anything I could have ever imagined.

3.

This is the thing. Since my brother Mthunzi died six months ago. God. It's not just my voice that's turned traitor. I've also been having flashbacks. (I'm just taking a drag of my cigarette.)

When it happens I feel like I'm in the nightmare, living it for the first time. But that first time happens again and again. It's torture.

(I'm taking another drag before I tell you this next bit as quickly as I can. I want to get it over with fast. Brace your hearts, it's so bad, and I don't want to damage you by telling you. Ok. I'm going to do it. Now. Right now.)

Mthunzi – my younger brother – keeps dying in front of me. (You know that quiet, quiet moment after you've exhaled all the way out and before you need to breath in again? When time stands completely still for a moment?)

He died a few months ago, but I somehow keep seeing him die everyday. It felt like it was happening all over again when I Locust chased after me on the street just now. And I'm seeing Mthunzi die again now. It's like a replay of what happened, but it feels like it's the first time, everytime – even though I'm on my own, on a quiet afternoon in our shack.

It happened on a normal day after school, when I was home alone.

Mthunzi should have been home already, but I knew he was cross with me for shouting at him that morning. I figured he was staying out late for revenge, to make me scared. He used to get back at me like that – typical younger brother.

But I was especially worried because he'd started hanging with that loser gang. That had started just after he'd turned 13 a few months before. It freaked me out. Those guys were bad news.

There was a knock on the door – just a normal knock – and I opened it to see who was there. It was Locust, his face wet with tears and snot, holding Mthunzi in his arms.

“I'm sorry Ndu. I'm sorry,” Locust said.

Mthunzi had been shot and he was limp, his head dangling right back, his whole body slack, blood all over his clothes. But he was still breathing.

I had never loved him more fiercely than then, and you have no idea how much I loved him.

And then he wasn't breathing anymore. (I am smoking my cigarette. I am taking a deep drag, and blowing it out. Blowing. Blowing. Emptying my lungs, the whole way. A quick next drag. Ok, ok, ok.)

I kept thinking that I just really wanted to give him the handful of licquorice Wilson's toffees I'd bought on the way home to say sorry I'd shouted. (Another drag, and another.) And to tell him that I hadn't meant to call him a loser that morning. I didn't mean it. I'd just been in a bad mood and hadn't felt like washing my cereal bowl, and I got mad when he wouldn't do it for me.

I had no idea it was the last time I'd ever see him alive.

That awful day keeps hounding me. Haunting me. Catching me wherever I go. And I deserve it. Because the truth is, it is all my fault. If I hadn't been mean Mthunzi would have been safely at home, instead of out on the street with that gang. He would be alive right now.

I keep wishing there was something – anything – I could do to change things.

4.

Later on, on the way back from fetching the twins from daycare, I realize there is something I can do. It's just a small something, but it is something.

Veliswa and Nqabisile tug on each of my hands the whole way home, trying to get my attention.

"Ndu, *please* can we play Snake on your phone when we get home..."

"Just for a little while. *Please* Ndu."

To be honest their whining actually helps. Holding on to their hot, skinny little four-year-old hands and getting distracted by their tugs and voices seems to pull me back into the now, and fades the worst of my monsters into background scenery. It's the same when I hang out with Stylus and Geekboy, and get caught up in what we're doing. It helps my brain work a little better than it has been since the day Mthunzi died.

I'm thinking about a *little* something I can do for Mthunzi.

In case you're wondering, I haven't tipped over the edge to complete insanity. I know I'll never have the chance to give him those sweets I bought for him. He'll never hear me say 'I'm sorry'. And the really hard part? I know I can never ever bring him back.

But I have this idea.

So when I get home I let the twins lie on my bed and play Snake III. They're totally obsessed. Within seconds they're 100% focused. Four skinny little hands working together, pushing the buttons on my old cellphone to steer

a goofy-eyed snake around the screen in the hunt for digital fruit. Seriously, babysitting while my mom's still at work doesn't get easier than this.

Even though I've been feeling all brave and on top of it on the walk home from daycare, my heart rollercoasters wildly when I pull Mthunzi's battered old suitcase out from under my bed. This is...was...his treasure chest. His name is scratched into the front of the suitcase in big letters. A peeling sticker beneath that has a big no entry sign and the words, 'Private Property! Keep Out!', written in bold red capital letters.

If my life were a TV programme this would probably be my cue to cry. But I don't. I haven't cried once since that day. It's not that I'm trying not to. I wish I could! – my tears just seem to be locked up somewhere out of reach.

"Ay, ay, Ndu! Veliswa's got her highest score ever! Come and look Ndu!"

I ignore the twins squawks. Snake III's jingle starts up a few seconds later.

This is only the second time *ever* that I've opened this suitcase. I press a button and flick one lock open. The flashbacks start to crowd me. My hands get sweaty. To try and make them disappear I concentrate as hard as I can on the other lock. Click. I feel like a guilty, frightened intruder as I push the lid back.

Super Strikas. There they are. Every single Super Strikas comic book since Super Strikas first began. Mthunzi's most beloved possessions. He was completely soccer crazy by the way. Everybody knew that. And he was so *so* proud of this comic collection.

But there's something terribly wrong. There's one comic missing. I'm sure of this because I've already checked and double-checked the issue numbers.

On the day of Mthunzi's funeral I had to do *something* to stop myself from losing it completely. So I opened Mthunzi's private property and counted the comics just like he used to do everyday. I checked and rechecked the issue numbers to see if I could be wrong. But issue #51 was definitely missing. Gone. Vanished. Not there.

I puzzle over this again this afternoon as I flick through the perfectly ordered issues, counting my way until I find the space where the missing comic should be. It still just doesn't make sense. Mthunzi was so fussy about making sure every single comic was in its right place. He wouldn't have been able to sleep at night if he knew there was one missing.

I slide my hand into the gap where the missing comic should be.

I close my eyes as tight as I can, and make a silent promise.

Mthunzi, I miss you so much little brother. I just want you to know that I'm going to find your missing Super Strikas comic for you. Or I'll find another copy of issue 51. I promise. I know it's not nearly enough to say sorry for what happened, but I don't know what else to do. I have a feeling you'll understand. If things were the other way around I think this is the kind of thing you'd have done for me.

For a moment it feels like everything is ok. As if Mthunzi's back, the comic's here, and our shack is its old self.

An old daydream unexpectedly snatches me away for a moment. One from before the nightmare began. The one where I'm a famous TV presenter on a MoGeek channel.

But reality doesn't take long to bite. I'm embarrassed I even mentioned that.

Mthunzi is dead.

My mood swings like a seesaw. I'm suddenly mad as a snake. This is all so wrong! Come on destiny you b1tch!

And just as suddenly absolutely desperate.

'Cut me some slack. I'm fixing this broken dream for Mthunzi. Stop these flashbacks and give me my old life back. My voice and my dreams, if nothing else!'

Nothing happens. No tears. But this time I can't stop the flashbacks from flooding in and taking over.

"Ndu!"

I nearly shatter into a million fragile pieces as my mother knocks violently on the window and barks my name.

5.

I notice that it's dark when I let her in. I missed that happening when I was stuck in my flashback world. Time lost me, and I lost time. The twins are pretty much in a Snake III coma, sprawled on my bed and still playing.

The metal walls of our tiny shack crack like a whip as the cold of night leeches out the warmth from this afternoon's sun. My mother doesn't make eye contact with any of us when she gets home. Nor does she speak to us. She never does anymore.

Same as everyday, these days, she puts down her plastic packet that holds her domestic worker's pinafore, her faded tackies and her floral purse with its worn brass clasp. Then she pours herself her first drink.

By the time she's had her fourth I have to get the hell out. She's driving me mental.

She's just sitting there on the couch like she does every night, staring at a patch of wall *next* to the TV, even though the TV is on. It's so freaky. Her eyes keep moving like she's watching something. What makes me feel guiltier than you can ever imagine is that I have a feeling I know what it is.

On that day when Mthunzi died the police told me I must tell my mother as soon as she got home and that she must go straight to the station to identify Mthunzi's body. That's where they'd taken him.

So I did. As soon as she got home.

She knocked on the window and I opened the door. She was smiling and about to give me a hug, and I just blurted it out before she could wrap her arms around me and give me a squeeze hello.

“Mthunzi is dead mom. He was shot. The police told me to tell you you must go straight to the police station to ID his body.”

Done. Just like the police had told me to.

I remember so clearly how her eyes stretched impossibly wide before her face crumpled up. Her whole body seemed to shrink, as if I'd punctured her. I left out the rest of the details. She didn't ask. And I couldn't bear to tell her it was my fault Mthunzi had been out, instead of at home with me. That I'd called him a loser that morning so he'd stayed out and hung out with the other losers to get back at me. I was afraid that she wouldn't be able to make herself love me any more if she knew the whole truth.

I look at her now with her eyes moving like that when she seems to be looking at nothing, and I think that's what she must be watching. Heartbreaking flashbacks of the worse moments of that terrible day. Same as me.

My cellphone is quiet now. The twins are passed out on my bed still dressed in today's clothes, innocent mouths hanging wide open in their sleep.

I change quickly, and pull on my coat over my going out clothes before I slipping out the door without saying goodbye.

I walk a few metres before I light another cigarette.

Row after row of shack doors are closed against the cold. Above them, branches of smoke stretch upwards like a winter forest. The satellite

dishes and TV antennae that are a standard feature on almost every shack are angled in the same direction, stargazing. The mishmash sounds of many different TV channels being watched at the same time comforts me.

Damn! As my cellphone beeps I realize the twins have almost run my battery flat with the gaming. I quickly message Stylus and she tells me which chatroom to find her in. When I've navigated my way there I see Geekboy's there already too.

Ndu: Jst wntd 2 lt u knw Im ok.

Stylus: Gd.

Geekboy: Jst b crfl of locst. Sw hm rnng aftr u. Nt cl!

I look around. Geekboy would freak if he knew I was walking to the shebeen by myself in the dark. And Stylus would have a lot to say if she knew who I was actually looking for.

Ndu: my bttry's bt 2 go flt. Gt 2 run.

Stylus: Qk qstn. Do u wnt 2 do a rn on Sundy?

Ndu: Hmmm...ok.

Geekboy: & lts do our mshup sn. I've gt cl nw prts 4rm my aunt. Say ys pls!

Ndu: My Bttrys bpng. Bye.

And my cellphone screen fades to grey, then black. Dead.

A distinctive whistle makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up straight. Not any old whistle, but Mthunzi's whistle. The one he'd always use when he wanted my attention. Two notes: one lilting up to the next.

I spin around. Looking everywhere for a sign of him. But there's nothing there. Just a stray dog eating rubbish out of a bin bag. It looks up at me, teeth bared.

That's me done! I run my heart out and only stop when the lights of the shebeen are in sight.

It's packed tonight. The music is pumping. Crowds of moths are going crazy around the neon sign outside. I can hear people inside laughing loudly, and shouting over the music.

And then I see him for the first time in so long. The lust of my life. KFCgull.

I've made a deal with Stylus that if I see him I will give him a hard time for just disappearing out of my life again. Stylus says KFCgull is like this :):

I can remember the lecture she's given me so many times. "He's all love and then he's like a barbed wire fence with a temper. I've seen what that does for your confidence. You've got to be careful of him."

But the chemistry kicks in, as always when he's around, and I feel my heart lift up, up, up towards the stars like a helium balloon.

6.

He's just standing there chatting, totally relaxed in a cloud of dope smoke. The guys he's with are the robotreurs that work with him at the traffic lights on the highway selling mozak albums, mirror balls and cellphone chargers. But KFCgull is the mozak*. Everybody is hanging on his every word, I'm not the only one who feels his chemistry. Whatever 'It' is, he's got it.

"Lets go inside and get some more drinks."

I stand in the shadows and watch them go. KFCgull walks with them, but then says something I can't hear, waves them on, and walks back outside.

I know he'll look at me eventually but he takes his time.

He slowly lights a cigarette.

Inhales.

Exhales slowly.

"Ndu, come here," he calls in a gruff voice, giving no sign that he's seen me.

I can't explain how he does that. It must be a kind of magic between us.

I don't go. I haven't seen him for a long time, even though I never stop thinking about him, and worrying if it might be something about me that stops him from calling. But when I see him I know that thing between us is still there. Why he doesn't call is just a mystery to me.

KFCgull turns and looks at me. Our eyes lock and stay locked as he walks towards me. I try to read him. He is so moody always. I don't know if he's going to be hot or cold. Up or down. Soft or sharp. Nice or nasty.

He's only about one centimetre away from me when he stops.

One word for the feeling between us. Electric!

Our lips are so close. His eyes don't match. It gets me every time. There's a sexy gold triangle that shines out from among the deep brown in one. And the other is just plain gorgeous brown.

Fireworks as our lips touch. His arms around me. My hands, sliding up inside the back of his shirt. My fingertips touching the thick crisscross of scars on his back.

Being with him does something amazing to me. It's like I can feel all these dark, sad feelings in him that are the same as mine. And that makes me feel ok again.

KFCgull nuzzles his face into my neck and runs his hands over my hair. I can feel the crackle of big dreams in him. I feel my own spark up against him.

"K..." [Voice Richter Scale: 5,6]

He puts his finger over my lips before I even get his name out.

"Shhhh...don't talk"

That's our thing. The rule. We don't talk with words. Only with our bodies.

Normally that suits me fine because my voice and speaking are such a nightmare for me anyway. But something in me can't stop the words from coming out.

"One of Mthunzi's comics is missing. I have to find it." [Voice Richter Scale Variable: 6,2 to 8,9]

My voice sounds as terrible as ever. It shakes, and rattles, and wheezes and rolls all over the place. It's like a terrorist has taken my vocal chords hostage.

KFCgull kisses away the tear that I hadn't noticed leak down my cheek.

It spurs me on.

"Do you think....do you think I might ever maybe be able to be a...a... TV presenter?" [Voice Richter Scale Variable: 7 to 9,2]

My words splutter out, sounding like a backfiring exhaust.

KFCgull's not faking the look of disbelief on his face.

My cheeks flame with shame as he laughs like he's just heard the funniest joke of his whole entire life.

I'm a fool. A fool! A stupid nobody idiot! I know better than to speak, and to say crazy stuff like this.

KFCgull stops laughing and strokes my cheeks. I think it's his way of saying sorry. He caresses the back of my neck, runs his hands down my back and then up over my front and holds one palm firmly over my heart. Listening hands that understand everything. They make me feel better.

I look up at his face. Our eyes lock. Some dark blindspot in me fits perfectly into that golden triangle in his eye. I feel my heart falling, cartwheeling with reckless joy. Even deeper than before.

7.

Weekends have much the same vibe as weeknights in our shack. But they're harder. You know why? They're loooooonger. It's Sunday and the TV's been on all weekend except for when we're asleep. Often I turn it off late at night after everyone's fallen asleep.

I wake up feeling like roadkill. My mother hasn't spoken to me at all since she knocked on the window on Friday. The twins are like feral midget screen junkies. The whole weekend they're either in front of the television or gaming on my mother's cellphone. Kind of like mini-me's of me, from a time before, when I was such a passionate MOgeek people couldn't recognize me without a screen in front of my face.

I should do something with them, I know. But I don't have the energy. Not for them. Not for Gkboy and our MOmashups, which I never used to miss. Not even for my promise to Mthunzi. The flashbacks keep sucking me in. And when they spit me out, I feel like the grey sky looks.

I haul my ass to Black Swan Dream for the Sunday morning run with Stylus. I only do it because I know it takes the burn off the frightened feeling that is like electricity shocking my veins and my skin as it sizzles around my body. Black Swan Dream is her little hair salon, by the way. It's inside a round room in a random tube of abandoned tunnel that sticks out of a hillside. It's got Black Swan Dream spraypainted on the outside, and inside it's got chairs and mirrors and hair salon stuff. Round doors made from nailed together pieces of old wooden packing crates locks the tunnel closed and keeps everything safe when she's not here. A friend of Stylus's painted the door for her with bold pictures of hairstyles, and a list of prices down one side.

A loud donkey lives in a little field next door. It brays it's annoyingly desperate call at me as I walk by. Like it always does.

"Shutup," I tell it. [Voice Richter Scale: 8,9]

It snorts back at me in disgust. Sounds like 'up yours' in donkey language, actually.

I extend the appropriate finger in the well-known gesture.

It raises its tail and does the dirty. Donkey: 1. Ndu: 0.

Stylus raises a well-manicured eyebrow at me. I hadn't realized she was there already.

"You're going to feel a *lot* better after this run," Stylus says.

Guess I'm not hiding how bad I'm feeling today too well. Mthunzi has died in front of my eyes about six times this morning, and it's only 9am.

"Hold on tight to your dreams Ndu," Stylus says, as we start off with a slow jog.

I want to roll my eyes at her, like I always do when she brings the Oprah Winfrey lines out, but I'm all out of mojo.

As usual the flashbacks get worse for the first twenty minutes of running, and then something kicks in that takes the electrical edge off. I start to feel a little better. And when we finally get back to the salon almost an hour later after sprinting the last 100 meters, I feel so much better. More like my old than I've felt since...well, the last run, to be honest.

"Got time for a juice in the salon?" Stylus asks.

“I’ve got to get back...uh...to keep an eye on the twins.” [Voice Richter Scale: 5,7] Wheeze, wobble, wince. The way my words sound say it all.

Stylus nods. She knows the code. My mother is ‘there, but not there’. Even though I know I haven’t done a great job of looking after the twins recently, I worry about my mother not being able to look after them properly when I’m not there.

“Just have a quick one and we can message to catch up while you walk home?”

I nod. Stylus flicks on the radio inside. The rounded walls in the salon are wallpapered with a combination of pictures of beautiful people with fabulous hair, and more corny Oprah Winfrey-esque motivational statements.

“I owe all this to you, you know Ndu,” she says, with a glance around the salon as she pours my juice. “You held my hand and kicked my ass when you needed to after my... after my parents died. It was so frigging tough, losing them and trying to look after my little brother on my own, *and* trying to braid enough hair for money to buy food and pay our rent. If you hadn’t stayed on my case, and my dreams and the work I needed to do to make Black Swan Dream happen, it never would have worked out. It would have been too much for me on my own.”

She hands me a glass, and clinks her own against mine.

“I want you to know I’ve got your back Ndu. I’m here if you need a shoulder to cry on. But just like you did for me – I’m going to get on your case when I need to.”

I gulp my juice.

“You’re going to fly one day, Ndu. I know it. You’ve always been top of the class at school, and you have the most brilliant ideas of anyone I’ve ever met in my life! You’ve just got to believe in yourself and work hard to make that happen. It’s like running. You’ve got to make the effort to get your shoes on, and then get out there and put one foot in front of the other. And you’ve shown you’ve got what it takes to do that.”

I don’t want to piss on her Oprah Winfrey bliss by telling her how unlikely it is that my dreams will ever come true, so I just give her a quick hug, and say goodbye.

But I’ve got a spring in my step when I walk home, with only my lovely daydreams for company.

Episode 2

.....

1.

Gkby: hw u dng? whn do we mt 4 our mashup? Gt stff 2 shw u?

Poor Geekboy. Before things got really tough, we used to spend so much of our free time together experimenting with cellphone gadgets and ideas. He's like my MOgeek brother. But that spark for mobile innovation that use to burn so bright in me hasn't been like it was since... Mthunzi died.

Look, it's still there, for sure. But it comes and goes. Geekboy keeps trying so hard to spark it up in me. I need to make more of an effort.

Ndu: Ill msg u aftr schl 2 mk a tm. Lkng 4wrld.

Stylus kicks me under the desk to warn me our teacher's come back into our classroom. I keep my cellphone under my desk as I look up.

"New sidekick in the hoodie," Stylus says under her breath as our teacher ushers in someone we've never seen before. The stranger is a woman. Youngish. Pretty hip. She's wearing those thick geek frame glasses I'd love to have.

To our surprise our teacher leaves, closing the door behind her against the cold windy weather outside. An icy breeze still steals in beneath the door.

"Carry on with what you're doing, while I set a few things up," the stranger says.

What? There's a ripple of surprise around the room. We're forbidden to use our cellphones in the classroom!

I carry on smsing on my phone. Everyone else has got a cellphone under the desk too. Somebody turns the volume on on a game, and everybody laughs.

“Glad you’re using your phones,” says the stranger over the noise. “I call myself a ‘cellphone evangelist’³. My job is to travel around schools and encourage students to tap into the potential of their phones.”

Another sound wave of astonishment runs across the room.

“First, since you are Generation Txt or the ThumbTribe⁴, or whatever you call yourselves, lets test out your sms-blitz skills. Are you up for a competition?”

Nobody answers, but there’s a cool vibe going down in the room.

“Ok, no pressure. Only do it if you feel like it.”

“When I say ‘Go’ you guys type up this paragraph on your cellphones in sms-language, or txtspk – whatever you call it.”

She points out a poster she’s stuck up at the front of the class.

“When you get to the end send me a Please Call Me to this number written on the board. The first message that gets to my phone marks the winner. Is everybody with me?”

We nod.

Go!”

³ Origins of term and concept, Steve Vosloo.

⁴ Thumbtribe is the name of a mobile phone enterprise with headquarters in Durban, South Africa. This term has been borrowed for my own use.

There's a thumbtribe blur going on in the classroom!

Eql edctns campgn hs md knwn dt of 24972 pblc ordnry schls in SA

I'm typing the words so fast I can't think.

3544 do nt hv elctrcty spply, 11450 use pit ltrne tylts

My thoughts are catching up

22304 do not hv stckd & fctning lbraris, & 32522 do nt hv stcked lbraris.

I'm so busy doing the Math, I forget to send the Please Call Me and somebody else wins.

"You guys are pretty quick," the cellphone evangelist says. "By the way, you can do what you want with that content you just created. Remix it, or share it on any of the social networks in any way want it. It's the age of transparency, after all, and you're the leaders of the mobile phone revolution, so you've got when you need in your hands."

"Part of the reason I'm a cellphone evangelist is because of this info," she points at the poster again. "I think cellphones can be used a lot more to address some of the massive education failures here. But the other reason is that wherever I travel in Africa I'm blown away by the unexpected things that young people are doing with their imaginations and repurposed mobile technology."

My phone vibrates as a message comes through.

Stylus: tll her u r a MOgeek!

Ndu: No way!

"Do any of you follow the Afrigadget blog?" the Evangelist continues.

I do. *And* I watch their Facebook page all the time. I'm an Afrigadget addict.

Stylus: Tll her!

Stylus knows just what an addict I am. Geekboy and I have spent hours hanging out at her salon doing the MOgeek think, and we've talked about Afrigadget thousands of times.

But there's just no way I'm going to answer. I can't! My voice.

Stylus: If u dn't sy smthng I will!

Ndu: Dnt u dare!!!!

Stylus: Da brks dnt cm oftn Ndu. Gt ovr urslf!

2.

The messages keep flying furiously back and forth between Stylus and I as the Cellphone Evangelist carries on talking. My nerves are on edge!

“Check www.Afrigadget.com out. It’s so fabulous! One of the great story’s there is about a group of young African inventors who hacked into their cellphones and set them up to remotely open and close their front doors.”

The classroom buzz goes up a notch.

“They’ve even set up 400-volt electric shocks on their doorknobs to give burglars the shock of their life!”

Stylus: U & Gkby md this 4 Blk Swm Dm!

Ndu: I knw. We tld u we gt the idea 4rm Afrgdgt.

Stylus: Exctly my pnt! Tll hr!

The Cellphone Evangelist carries on, not at all phased by us looking at our cellphones, and not her.

“And they can even send an sms to their home phone, which sets a teamaker to work so tea’s ready when they get home. Cool, huh?”

Everybody starts talking.

“Do you guys do anything like this, or know of anything like this that’s happening around here?”

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! I'm surprised nobody else can hear my heart.

Stylus nudges me urgently. So hard that I gasp out loud!

The teacher looks at us. I feel my face getting hot. I start to feel all panicky. And when I feel really panicky I start to think of Mthunzi. And then, you know what happens. The flashbacks start pushing at me. My hands go sweaty.

"Ndu's a mogeek," Stylus says, in a loud clear voice. "She makes loads of things with our friend Geekboy. And she's got so many more amazing ideas. Ask her. She'll tell you."

OMG. Stylus, you traitor!

A knowing murmur runs around the class.

The Evangelist's eyes light up.

"Really? I'd love to hear about what you make!"

I'm battling to breath. My hand is so sweaty I lose my grip on my cellphone and it clatters to the floor.

Somebody laughs. Everyone else is silent.

I take ages to pick my cellphone up. I'm feeling so dizzy. The silence stretches on forever. I wish Mthunzi was here.

"She battles to speak properly," says a matter-of-fact voice at the back of the class.

"Tell them Ndu! This is your chance!" Stylus hisses at me. "You can do it!"

I think of my deal with fate that I've done nothing about. Mthunzi's comic is still missing. So is my voice. My dreams are still unreachable, even when they come closer. Silence slides its fingers up my throat and I swallow hard as my eyes water and my tummy flips.

I start to tremble uncontrollably. Stylus' face falls.

"Oh god. I'm sorry Ndu. I was trying to help. What have I done! Lets get out of here," she says, picking up both our bags and dragging me by the arm towards the door.

"Wait!" the evangelist comes after us. "Are you ok?"

I shake my head. No, I'm not ok.

"Here," she says, "take this." She presses one of the memory cards into my hand. "There's a video on there especially for you. Watch it on your cellphone when you're feeling better."

Then she's gone, her heels echoing loudly in the corridor, as she goes back into my classroom.

3.

Outside school I crouch down and put my head on my arms.

“Oh god Ndu, what have I done?! What can I do to help you?”

My headspace is a mess. My hands are still shaking violently.

“I’ve got to run.”

“No way,” Stylus says, “you’re not going anywhere without me.”

“No, no. I mean I really have to run. Like, jog, you know.”

“Oh..oh...ok. Well we can do that.”

Which is how we find ourselves running all the way to Black Swan Dream in our school uniforms. And then further on from there. Running away from the nightmares. Just running and running in the boiling sun with our satchels on our backs. Until the flashbacks start to fade, and the out-of-hand electricity in my veins calms down, and I start to remember what it’s like to be the old Ndu again.

As we approach Black Swan Dream again I hear that annoying donkey breying like a crazy thing.

“Why does it do that?” I ask Stylus.

She shrugs. “No idea. Maybe she just likes the sound of her own voice. How you feeling?”

“Much better.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I know.”

“Can I cut your hair to make it up to you?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“I use the hairwashing basin as a shower sometimes. Want to have a shower and wash your hair? I’ve got fresh clothes here for you.”

She tosses me a lumo pink shirt in a clear packet.

“Want this, by the way? It came free with a GLAMOUR.”

“Thanks!”

When I’m done Stylus gets to work on my hair with a comb and scissors. I put the memory card into my phone and load up the video.

Stylus watches over my shoulder as she combs, clips and snips.

A girl about my age appears on the screen. A slum sprawls endlessly behind her, and a small boy keeps peeking his face into the line of the camera, and grinning. I notice the girl’s jersey is too short for her arms, and her school dress is too tight and small for her breasts.

She holds up a wire car.

“I made this toy car for my son. It’s remote controlled. I’ve rewired a cellphone into a remote for it. See here, the cellphone keypad is the

steering wheel. And this," she pushes the hash key "makes the headlights flash."

I keep expecting somebody to stop her, because her voice is awful. I mean, really shocking. She's so nervous that it's cracking and breaking. [Voice Richter Scale: 9,2] It makes my skin crawl.

She does a car steering demo. The little boy runs alongside the car on the dusty, bumpy street, grinning and laughing, and waving back at the camera from time to time.

"I've made a few cars for my friends' children. And I've even sold a few to people."

A close up of her face. Her eyes are watering, she's got a nervous tick in one eye, and she keeps on swallowing hard.

Her voice is trembling so badly it makes me burn and twist inside. But she carries on.

"Lots of kids want my cars, you know. I'm starting to take some orders. It's good. I'm happy to be an entrepreneur. And I'm proud of myself."

The last word comes out like a strange squawk. But her smile looks so triumphant. And then it ends.

Stylus clears her throat pointedly.

If she does an Oprah Winfrey on me now I'm going to kill her.

But she doesn't. She just holds my gaze in the mirror in front of us for a long time. And I get it. I do.

4.

Gkboy arrives as Stylus is finishing up.

“Wow! You look hot, Ndu!” he exclaims as he sees me.

Stylus has cut my hair so that it looks like black flames burning out of my skull. I’m not sure if the ‘hot’ comment is meant to be funny, but I think I look pretty cool.

“I wish I’d know you’d be here,” he says, “I would have brought the geek stash. My aunt’s given me a whole lot of stuff from her cellphone shop. Some old cellphones, some new wire, chargers, data cards, the works!”

I shrug and smile.

“My cellphone projector is nearly done too. Such a great idea you had Ndu. It’s working out so well. I can’t wait for you to see it.”

“Love to.” (With small verbal earthquakes on each word.) (Voice Richter Scale: 6.3]

Geekboy spots me checking out his hair.

“You like? Stylus did it. It’s called the Nethead. Recognise it? It’s the analog cellphone network structure pattern.”

So it is!

“The *extreme* MOgeek look,” Stylus says.

It goes well with Geekboy's thick-rimmed coke-bottle-bottom glasses.

I get up and stretch some of today's tension out of my back, before I pick up my bag and make moves to go.

"Um...want me to walk you home?" Geekboy asks.

He's thinking of Locust. I shake my head. Sometimes this not talking thing is quite handy. Like now when it gets me off the hook from explaining that I'm not going home. I'm going to the side of the highway to see if I can get a glimpse of KFCgull rocking the mozak gig.

"Ok. But we must get together for that mashup soon. There's something in the air. *Everybody's* talking about mobile phones and opportunities!"

Stylus walks me out.

"Don't go breaking KFCgull's heart with that new do," she says dryly.

She's *so* on to me.

I wink at her sheepishly, my heart already picking up the pace as I think of KFCgull. Then I'm gone, with that irritating donkey shouting the odds behind me. But I'm so busy dreaming about what might happen between KFCgull and I, that don't let it irritate me for long.

5.

When I get there KFCgull is strutting his stuff on the traffic light island in the middle to the highway. He' singing into his mic. Shaking his booty. He's got so slick at operating the MObj set up Geekboy and I invented.

If you didn't know you wouldn't even notice him pressing buttons on the cellphone keypad to synch his backing beats. His voice and the beats boom out from trolley speakers that we wired up from old parts. They're easy to roll backwards and forwards between the township and the highway. And to quickly hide the speakers if the traffic police get annoyed.

The robotreneurs work the traffic jam, selling tiny KFCgull mozak albums –another one of mine and Geekboy's brainwaves – for customers to slot into their phones. Now and again they flog a mirror ball or a cellphone charger, but it's the mozak albums that are the big sellers.

KFCgull's so caught up in his performance that he doesn't notice me. I don't mind. I love watching him.

I turn on my cellphone video camera and start filming. Him. Boy, he really has got *It*. With a bit of effort I manage to pull my focus away and film the stop-starting cars, taxis and buses. The cows strolling along the roadside behind the trolley speakers. Exhaust fumes pump like disco-smoke machines. A robotreneur spins a mirror ball and it reflects it all: KFCgull, fragments of traffic and the bleak countryside beyond that stretches on endlessly to nowhere.

A hand touches my shoulder. Locust?! I drop my phone and spin around.

"This is a surprise," says KFCgull, as he stoops to pick up my phone. He smells of delicious aftershave and clean man sweat.

I'd been so caught up in my filming I hadn't noticed him leave his stage.

He touches my cheek with the back of his hand and looks at me quizzically.

"Can I watch it?" he asks, as he starts to anyway, without even glancing up at me. And then, "Lets walk."

He takes my hand like it's the most natural thing in the world. Like we're always together. Which we're not. I never know if we're on or off. Or if we're even *anything* – unless we're together and he's in a good mood.

KFCgull watches that video again and again as we walk. The sound quality is good. KFCgull's voice is strong and clear, and the backing beats, the traffic, the hooters, and the robotreurs sales calls blend seamlessly into a soundtrack.

He bluetooths the video to his cellphone.

"Nice work, Ndu."

He pulls me into his arms and I lose myself there for a while.

It's only later, when I'm walking home across the scrubland by myself, that I realize he didn't ask me if he could. And he never noticed my new hair.

6.

It's really late, but I can't sleep. It's windy outside.

It's the memory of that girl with the strange voice that pushes me to write to Super Strikas about the missing issue. I don't have their email address so I inbox them from my Facebook page.

Dr Sprstrka ppl.

*My brthr Mthunzi ws ur grtst fan. He cllctd evry issu of Sprstrka & kpt thm undr hs bd. A fw mnths ago he was klld in a gngstr rvnge attck evn thgh he ws nt a gngstr. He ws jst wth da wrng ppl @ da wrn tm. Da blt ws nt mnt 4 hm. He ws 13 yrs old. Hs cllctn of sprstrka cmics is wht we hv lft of hm. Bt sumhw thr is 1 mssng. I wld lk 2 fnd anthr cpy so dt I cn cmplt hs lyf lng drm & 2 say srry 4 smthng I did. **I hv a flng dat if I do I mght b abl 2 rch a vry bg drm of my own.** Its nt a gd idea 4 me 2 tl u mr dan ths. Do u pls hv a cpy of issue no. 51? I wld b 4vr grtfl. If u myl me ill snd u an addrss 4 me.*

Ndu.

P.S. I'v incldd a foto of Mthunzi in his SupaStrikas kit.

I flick back to my Facebook newsfeed and my skin clenches into goosebumps at the photo at the top of the newsfeed. It's that photo of Hector Pieterse. You know the one. I've seen it before. The terrible one of small Hector, limp in his school uniform with the older boy carrying him and his sister running beside them. It was taken after he was shot during the Soweto Uprising when police opened fire on students protestors. Someone in my class has posted it with the status update "Never Forget. Don't let this ever happen again. Give us our textbooks and a good education."

The flashbacks push at me. I dig my nails into the palm of my hand, crisscrossing my lifelines with half moons. The pain distracts me enough to keep me from the flashback trap.

I click through on the Wikipedia link and read the whole story. There is one paragraph that I read again and again.

“Sophie Tema drove him to a nearby clinic where he was pronounced dead. Mbuyisa and Nzima were harassed by the police after the incident and both went into hiding. Mbuyisa’s mother told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that she received a letter from Mbuyisa in 1978 from Nigeria but she has not heard from him since.”

I sit and stare into the darkness in our shack for a long time. Somewhere outside an owl hoots, and another answers. Two notes, one tilting up the scale to the next.

I don’t even know I’ve fallen asleep until I wake up. The wind has dropped. It’s still dark outside. I listen for everyone’s breathing and only then do I wake up enough to remember – again – that there are only four of us here, safely asleep in our shack. Not five. I roll onto my stomach and press my tearless face into my pillow, aching.

I sit up in bed and get my phone out again. I open my video gallery, plug my earphones in, and press play.

There he is! Mthunzi, playing the fool outside our shack with all of us around him. He’s pretending he’s Shakes from Super Strikas taking on his arch enemy Skarra.

“You don’t have a chance!” he goads.

He twists this way and that, miming a tackle.

“Eat dirt busta! Watch this!”

He bicycle kicks an imaginary ball into the tightest top corner of the net.

“Ladduuuuuma!”

I'd forgotten how hilarious Mthunzi was! He hams it up like a pro soccer player, punching his fists into the air, doing a backflip, pulling his shirt over his face as he runs around the edge of his imaginary field. And then he pulls the 'shirt' down, wipes imaginary tears away from his cheeks, and blows kisses to the crowds.

"Mthunzi! You're a rascal!" my mother laughs out loud in the background.

The video swivels to her. I forget to breathe for ten seconds. She looks so young! Her face is so relaxed and happy, and she's having fun.

I stop the video, pull the blankets back, and tiptoe barefoot across the shack's cold linoleum floor to my mother's bed. I peer down at her until my eyes get used to the dark. She's lying on her side, deeply asleep, but her forehead is still scrunched up in worry and I can hear her grinding her teeth. Her hands are clasped tightly together in front of her face as if she's praying.

I gently smooth her hair back from her face, just like she used to when we were little. She smiles – smiles! – before her face creases back into worried frown lines.

I watch her chest gently rising and falling for a long time, until we are both breathing in the same rhythm.

When I climb back into bed I feel different. My thoughts are like jigsaw puzzle pieces made up of my mom, Mthunzi, the twins, Hector Pieteron, his sister, Mbuyisa....

An owl hoots again outside and another answers. Two notes, one lilting up to the next.

I haven't cried for months. Not since Mthunzi died. Somehow, out of the tragedy of Hector's story, its Mbuyisa's exile and unexplainable silence that cracks something in me wide open. The dam walls burst and I sob into my pillow until sleep drowns me.

7.

I don't get up the next day. Nothing in me wants to, so I don't. I just want to stay in my bed where it's safe and warm.

The twins, curious, come over and ask me questions.

"Why don't you get up Ndu?"

"Aren't you going to go to school?"

I'm surprised when my mother comes over and looks down at me for a long time. Then she sits down on the side of the bed and strokes my hair away from my forehead.

"I think you should stay home today, Ndu."

My eyes well with tears. It's the most she's said to me in weeks.

Before she leaves for work she brings me a hot water bottle, a glass of water and a bowl of biscuits.

"I've asked the neighbour if she can fetch the twins from daycare today, and look after them until I get home. You just take it easy. Get some sleep. You can call me if you need to."

I stay in bed all day. Nothing happens. No flashbacks, I mean. I am just so sad and so tired I can't even move.

It's raining outside. I hear it tapping on the roof, and dripping into a plastic bucket in the corner of the shack.

I hug the hot water bottle and I drink the water, but I don't touch the biscuits. I fade in and out of sleep. When I'm awake I just lie and look at the curtain moving with the breeze.

I hear everyone trying to be quiet when they come back at the end of the day. They leave the overhead light off, and just put a lamp on.

My mother makes dinner and I listen to the sounds of her stirring and chopping. She gives the twins a bucket bath and helps them into their pyjamas.

"Can we play Snake III?" Veliswa whispers.

"Not tonight my darling. I'm going to read you two a bedtime story instead."

The smell of my mother's stew fills the shack. It smells like home used to smell.

I must have fallen asleep again because it's the twin's solemn stares that wake me.

"Do you want some supper?"

I only want a cup of tea with sugar.

I hear the kettle boil and the tinkle of a spoon stirring the sugar into the cup. And I hear the cup being put down carefully on the crate next to my bed. But I never wake up to drink it.

The TV stays off all night. My tea turns cold and the milk turns into a thick scum on the surface.

Once, long after the lights have been turned off I open my eyes for a moment, and see my mother looking down at me.

“Why is my voice so ugly?” I ask her.

She looks at me like she has no idea what I’m talking about. Then she smooths her hand very gently over my forehead.

My confession just starts spilling out. I’m too upset to measure it on the Richter scale. “I shouted at Mthunzi on the morning he died. I didn’t feel like washing my cereal bowl and he wouldn’t do it for me, so I called him a loser.” The tears are sliding down my cheeks and into my ears. “I think that’s why he didn’t come home right after school that day. If I hadn’t he would have come home. He wouldn’t have been out with the gang, and he wouldn’t have got shot. When he died he thought that I thought he was a loser.”

“Shhhshhhshhhhh,” my mother says, and keeps stroking my forehead.

“And I’m sorry I gave you such a fright that day when you came home. I should have been gentler and kinder. I just told you what the police told me to say. I wasn’t thinking properly.”

My loud, ugly sobs are unstoppable.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Ndu,” says my mother. “You’ve got yourself tied up in knots. None of this is your fault. Really.”

She keeps stroking my forehead and I start to feel those knots come undone, one by one, until my body slowly unwinds and I sleep.

8.

I know I'm dreaming. Mthunzi reaches his hand out from the cellphone screen to help me onto the soccer field inside it. We are in our red Supa Strikas shirts, the ones with the KFC branding on the front.

Shakes is on the team. So is Hector. As is Cool Joe, Dancing Rasta and North Shaw. I don't see Mbuyisa at first and I think he must be injured but then I see him stride onto the field, strong and sure of himself. That makes me so happy.

There are just a few minutes left of the game and the score is 2-2 against Invincible United.

When the whistle goes I try my best to stay on the sidelines, out of the way of the players who really know what they're doing.

But Mthunzi and Hector keep setting me up to score! They whistle a two-note whistle, one lilting up the scale into the next, to tell me to take the shot!

But the ref announces that the rules have changed and I have to make a speech before I am allowed to take a shot at goal. But I can't do it. My mouth is as dry as a Marie Biscuit. I can't speak in public! I just can't!

Someone's trying to send me a message on my cellphone. But I'm not allowed to check my messages on the field. But there's another message, and another, and another, until I can't concentrate on the soccer game anymore.

I wake up. My cellphone is going ballistic.

Stylus: R u ok?

Stylus: u wrnt @ school.

Stylus: u hvnt answrđ any of my mssgs 2day.

Stylus: cnt slp im so worid.

Stylus: pls jst lt me knw u r ok.

Ndu: Im hr xx

Stylus: OMG Ndu. Whr hv u bn?!

Ndu: @ hom in bd.

Stylus: All day?!!!

Ndu: All day. Wsnt flng so wll dis mrng

Stylus: U bttr nw?

I have to think about that for a few minutes.

Ndu: Mch bttr.

Stylus: Anythng I shld knw abt?

I look at the time glowing on my phone. 3.27am.

Ndu: Nthng dat cnt wt tl 2moro.

Stylus: Im so gld u r ok. Thnk gd. Swt drms.

But I'm awake now, in a dreamy sort of way. I smile to myself when I realize I'm glowing in the dark in that lumo pink T-shirt Stylus gave me.

The jigsaw puzzle of my dream is still with me. I'm trying to put the pieces together.

I plug my headphones in and watch the video of the girl with the shaky voice again.

And then I do something I realize has been ticking over in the back of my mind for a few days. I make sure my family is sound asleep, and then I turn my video camera on myself. Quietly, I tell it everything about my pocket school idea.

"It's a school in a cellphone. One in everyone's pocket. It's zero-rated so it's free. And it's got a proper library, just like Yoza, but with all the textbooks, and class notes, worksheets, old exam paper questions and answers."

[Voice Richter scale: Variable. 7.9 to 9.2]

And I don't stop there. I go on, with my voice jumping and shaking. [Voice Richter scale: Variable, 8,6 to 9,4) I don't even take a break. I just carry on telling the cellphone video camera all about the stuff I've been thinking about cellphones and school, until I'm done.

I don't watch it. I imagine that would be torture of the worst kind. I just lie in bed thinking about everybody out there who can't sleep, lying in their shacks, looking at their phones. Lots of screens glowing beneath lots of tin shack roofs, together in their nighttime aloneness. The Glowmob. I like that. So I save my video as Glowmobgirl1 and then I share it with Stylus and Geekboy.

Ndu: Dnt shw ths 2 any1. Hyt my voice. Bt u mght lk dis.

An owl hoots outside and another answers. Two notes, one lilting up the scale to the next.

8.

“It’s ok if you pick the twins up from aftercare a little later than usual after school today,” my mother says before she leaves for work the next day. “I think you need to take things easy a bit. You’ve had a rough time. We all have. Why don’t you have some fun with your friends after school?”

This is the most she has said to me in months. And – wait for it – she hasn’t drunk or stared at the wall for two nights in a row, *and* she got up early and made porridge for all of us this morning.

“Thanks mom,” The words fumble out. (4 on the Richter scale).

I’m a bit nervous about going back to school after my meltdown there the other day. But nobody’s any different. It’s just another day in the classroom.

Stylus and I catch up at breaktime. In the distance I see the Cellphone Evangelist walking down the corridor and into another classroom.

It’s because of her that I find myself hanging about on the front steps of the school after almost everyone has gone. Call me a mogeek if you want, but the truth is I’m just hanging about in the hope that I might see her again. There’s so much I want to know. And there’s so much I want to tell her and show her. I want to tell her about mozak and mozak albums. I just know it’s going to hit the big time one day. I want to tell her about it. And about my pocket school ideas, and the rest too.

Maybe even about wanting to be a mogeek TV presenter. My whole skin goes hot with embarrassment when I think about asking her what she

thinks of that, and what she might be able to tell me that might help. But damnit, if I see her I'm going to ask.

A message comes through from Geekboy. It's like he knows I'm in a MOgeekville state of mind.

Geekboy: Stylus is wrkng lyt 2nght. She jst msgd me to sy she wldnt mnd som cmpny. So hw bout a mo-mashup @ Blck Swm Drm dis eve? 6pm?

Ndu: lv 2.

Geekboy: ☺ ill wlk u hm aftr.

I check my Facebook messages while I'm sitting there passing the time. No reply from Super Strikas. I shift about uncomfortably on the step as my thoughts swing back to Mthunzi's missing comic. I haven't done enough to find a replacement.

Things go from mundane to completely bad in a very short time.

A huge TV van pulls up outside the school.

A woman in beautiful clothes jumps out. I recognize her from TV. She's a presenter! Her eyes scan the school grounds, and then rest on me.

"Hey," she says, as she strides towards me, "could you help me?"

I nod.

She pushes a few buttons on her phone and then holds it out so I can see the picture on the screen.

"I'm looking for the Minister of Education. This is a picture of her.

I look at the screen and see a face I've seen often on TV.

We got a tip off that she's in the area today, visiting some schools about textbooks that haven't arrived. Have you seen her here at your school today by any chance?"

"No, sorry." (Voice Richter scale: 0!)

I'm shocked at how perfectly my words came out.

"Ok, well thanks anyway," the TV presenter says, and walks back to the van.

She makes a phone call and once she's done starts talking to the van's driver. They keep looking over their shoulder at me.

She makes another phone call, nods at the driver, and then comes striding back over to me again.

"Look, I'm covering the textbook crisis here for the news. How would you feel about me interviewing you?"

My mouth drops open. She seems to take that as a sign that I need some persuading.

"You're a learner, so you're a part of this story, you know. I'd be really interested to hear what you have to say."

I think of Stylus. I know what she would say I should say. And I decide to give it a go.

Butterflies go ballistic in my stomach as I nod as casually as I can.

“Excellent!” the TV presenter says.

She beckons to the driver who starts up the truck, drives it closer and unloads and sets up his camera equipment with the lens focused on me.

“Ok,” she says. “This is going to be very relaxed. I’ll ask you a couple of questions, just to get you going, but you’re allowed to say whatever you want about this.”

I touch my hair, and smooth my uniform down.

“And....action.”

“The school system is meant to serve you. In light of the textbook crisis, do you think you’re getting everything you deserve out of the schooling system?”

“I...I...I...” (Voice Richter scale: 10)

“Don't worry,” the TV presenter says, “It’s totally normal to get a little bit nervous in front of the camera. We often do a few takes before we get it right. Just take a deep breath, and start again whenever you’re ready.”

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I’m going to get it right!

“Do you want me to repeat the question?” asks the TV presenter.

I shake my head. I’ve got all the answers. The Equal Education stats from class the other day, my Pocket School idea. I’ve fantasised about being a TV presenter so many times I know exactly what I need to do.

“Ok then. And....action.”

.....(Voice Richter scale: 0)

Not because of my sleek MoGeek TV presenter style. But because there is no sound at all. My throat has closed entirely. My thoughts have frozen. I've got cement where my brain is meant to be. I just can't do it.

The interviewer looks towards the cameraman and mimics slicing her finger across her throat. He stops the camera rolling and starts to pack up. "Listen. Thank you so much for trying."

They finish packing up and drive off. The shards of my dream make a terrible crunching noise as they smash apart beneath their van wheels, and get lost amongst the pebbles and the dust.

Episode 3



1.

I'm so glad Stylus is busy chatting to her client while she braids her hair. The radio's on in the background, and the music spills out around the candle lit tunnel. Its super chilled.

Geekboy has set up all the mogeekshit at an empty hair-cutting station.

He wheels another salon chair over for me and flicks on a battery operated light he's clipped on to the mirror. Holy crack and polony! Now I know why he's been so keen to show me this stuff! What a MOgeekstash! Old broken phones that we can use for parts, as well as chargers, cables, batteries and memory cards – what a haul!

I plug a pair of earphones into my phone, and run the Glwmbgrl1 video for him to watch.

He gets all excited and starts working through the technical options of making it work.

“Hey, what language are you speaking,” the girl who is having her hair braided calls out, laughing as she watches us in the mirror.

Half way through a sentence, I abruptly stop. I hadn't even realized I was speaking. (Voice Richter scale: Unknown.)

“I think its called mogkspk,” Stylus jokes. “The only people I know who speak it are Ndu and Geekboy though. When they get chatting I can't get a word in edge ways.”

“Hang on,” Geekboy says, “shhhh...turn the radio up. I thought I heard the presenter say KFCgull.”

“No way,” Stylus says, but leans across and twists the volume button.

“...overnight sensation KFCgull on the show with us tonight! How are you?”

“I’m good, thank you!” KFCgull’s husky voice echoes in the tunnel.

Stylus stops braiding and looks at me. Geekboy puts down the cables he was wiring. My jaw drops.

“So, how does it feel being top of the YouTube hit parade in Africa today?”

“Man, it’s a really good feeling. I’ve dreamed of this, but I can’t believe my dream has come true!”

Stylus’ comb clatters to the floor.

“Well, I must say that we’ve been watching it again and again in the studio today. And holy, we are loving your voice, and the whole mozak gig you’ve got set up on the side of the highway. Respect brother!”

Geekboy and I look at each other in shock. He reaches for his phone and starts googling.

“Thanks. Thanks so much,” says KFCgull.

“So, I’m sure our listeners would love to hear the amazing story behind your whirlwind success?”

“Well, yeah. It’s been incredible. Yesterday afternoon the Idols judges happened to drive along the stretch of highway where I run a mozak gig on an island at the traffic intersection. You’ve probably seen that in the video?”

“Yeah man. We’ve seen it, and we love it! In fact, we’d love to see and hear that at every traffic intersection!”

“Thanks, thanks. I appreciate it. Really. So the Idols judges came by in their convertible. I actually didn’t even spot them, but apparently they were stuck in traffic so they watched me for quite a long time. And they bought one of my mozak albums – which is what I call a music album on a cellphone data card – from one of my robotreneurs. You just slot it into your cellphone, you know.”

We wait for him to mention us.

He doesn’t.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Stylus snorts. “I...I...I. Could the guy be more up his own alley?”

“Shhhh,” Geekboy says. “I’m listening.”

“Yeah listeners. Watch out for this. Everybody in the studio hasn’t been able to resist buying one of KFCgull’s Mozak* albums today, and we haven’t stopped playing his songs on our cellphones since.”

“Thanks man,” KFCgull says, “That’s good of you to say. So, yeah, the Idols judges started tweeting about me when they saw me. And then they found the YouTube video I posted just a day or two ago, and started tweeting with a link to the YouTube video. I think they must have a pretty big

Twitter following, because a lot of people picked up on it. And then – bang! – it just went viral!”

“And trust me music lovers, this is a virus we all want to catch! Go and check out KFCgulls video on YouTube. You’ll see why we were falling over ourselves to get him into the studio today, to give us the scoop. Our trend forecast is that you better watch out for the mozak album wave – its gonna roll across Africa for sure. We reckon it’s the next big thing. And Mozak* KFCgull is the very first to ride the wave. Get an earful of this!”

KFCgull’s song fills Black Swan Dream.

“Gawd, I love this song already,” says the girl with the half-braided hair, grooving in her salon seat.

“1 576 493 hits on YouTube,” Geekboy says, holding the screen towards us for us to see.

“Who the hell does he think he is?,” shouts Stylus in protest, her hands on her hips. “What about you guys?!”

“Hang on,” says braid girl. “What’s up with you guys? Am I missing something here?”

2.

By the next afternoon I still haven't stopped fuming. It's meant to be my quiet time on my own in the shack after school, but my head is busy.

What are the chances that on the day that I get my big break, KFCgull gets his? I'm not sure what's worse – that he didn't mention Geekboy and I in the radio interview, and that it was MY uncredited video of him that he posted on YouTube which went viral! Or that I fluffed my own chance at TV presenter fame when the chance was offered to me on a plate.

But if I think about it for longer than five seconds I have to admit that it's worse that I fluffed my own chance at success. Lets face it. It was in my hands, and I completely blew it.

What is different to usual is that I'm burning – but with anger and frustration, rather than horror and sadness.

I've never seen Stylus and Geekboy as mad as they were last night. Sure, it's amazing that KFCgull got his lucky break. He's got the talent and he worked hard and put himself out there. He deserves it. But to take the credit for all our concepts and not even mention us? All sorts of names I know I am not allowed to call anyone in public cross my mind. You can pick your favourite.

I kick the bed in frustration. It feels so good so I kick it again. But I miss and instead my foot connects solidly with Mthunzi's suitcase. My little toe hooks on it and bends right back. The pain! Scheezkebab. Off the freaking scale.

But it does the trick. When the shooting stars around my toe have mutated into an invisible but dull throb, I face up to the need to focus.

There's been no action in my Facebook message inbox. What is up with those Super Strikas people? Getting that missing issue means the world to me. Surely if they've read my mail they must get that? I press resend. Then resend again, just to push the point.

I swipe across the screens on my phone, simply to give my hands something to do. Out of habit I click on the Mxit icon. And it dawns on me. Why didn't I think of this before. Mxit Classifieds! I can place an ad.

I fill in my details, write up my ad message and post it straight away.

"Dsprtly skng Supa Strikas issu #51 2 fix brkn drms"

When I read it back I think maybe that was a little over dramatic, even if it is the truth.

But it gets the result I was hoping for because a message pings up on my screen almost immediately.

"Jst sw ur ad. I hv da issu u r lkng 4. I c we r in da sm area. I cn mt u der?"

I can't believe my luck!

No, on second thoughts, I actually I can believe it. If KFCgull can become famous overnight, then I can totally believe that somebody out there might have an old issue of a Super Strikas comic that they're willing to flog. It's not really much of a comparison when I think of it that way, is it?

I make plans to meet the person with issue #51 at Black Swan Dream tomorrow.

“Mthunzi, just you wait and see. I promised I was going to sort this thing out for you. Watch this space!”

I make myself a cup of tea to celebrate, and I get taken hostage by the most hectic dose of FOMO. Be honest, if your boyfriend/lust-of-your-life/whatever-he-is became an overnight pop sensation and you didn't hear from him, how do you think you would feel once the shock wore off?

Uh huh. Exactly.

3.

I can't actually believe it when I see KFCgull, but there he is. Right in front of me, on the road to Black Swan Dream.

Somehow I thought he must have left here already. Left our township behind for the big lights. But here he is, walking along the same dust road I'm taking to go and meet the person who has issue #51.

Despite all the bravado of yesterday I feel totally surprised by how I feel when I see him. Shy, because he belongs to the world now, not just to me – if he ever did. My helium balloon heart does its upward tug, even though I'm meant to be mad at him. But strangest of all is that he looks so... vulnerable, really, and all I want to do is make him feel better.

KFCgull's got dark shadows under his eyes like he hasn't slept for nights. He looks haggard and upset. Like he's on a massive low.

“Hello....I...I...” [Richter scale reading: 7,6]. My voice runs out of mojo, but my hand flutters towards his cheek of its own accord.

“I..I..what?” snaps KFCgull, his face cruel. “If you want to say something Ndu, just say it. You can’t always expect me to read into your silences.”

I feel like I’ve been slapped hard across the face. My hand is still floating in mid air. I stare at it, just hanging there, frozen.

I haven’t seen this side of him for quite a while. When he only speaks with words that hurt, and won’t speak with touch, like we usually do.

I thought this hard side of him had gone away. His face looks different. His eyes won’t let me in. And our chemistry has gone sour. I feel completely stranded.

I try a smile. A watery, uncertain one, sure. But I’m just trying to let him know everything’s ok.

He doesn’t smile back.

“I was just coming to see if I could find you at Black Swan Dream, Ndu. I just wanted to let you know that you’re not doing it for me. It’s over.”

He says it so casually, as if he’s saying something like “I really don’t like Coca-Cola. I can totally live without it.” A throw-away line.

My mind isn’t working very fast. But I do find myself thinking that he must have thought we were an item if he’s officially dumping me. Good to know. Ha (bitter) ha.

“You look like you don’t understand, Ndu. Let me make it easier for you.”

He picks up a long stick lying on the roadside, and with a strange smile he pretends to pluck his heart from his chest, toss it in the air and swipe at it

like a baseball. He keeps his eyes on 'it', watching it go, tracking it until it disappears over the horizon.

He looks back at me with an expression I can't understand. I search for that golden triangle in his eye, and for any kind of clue to what's going on. He just stares me down.

"Bounce," he says, with a toss of his head, indicating I should leave.

It hits a nerve. "Don't you speak to me like that!" [Voice Richter scale:10]

"Don't you speak to me like that!" he mimics back at me.

His imitation of my voice is horribly accurate. He matches the tremors 100% to the words. Strange twisted cruelty. It chills me.

I stand there staring at him, my skin ice cold. Stylus' words come back to haunt me. He's "like a barbed wire fence with a temper. " I thought he'd grown out of that.

KFCgull opens his mouth to say something more. I can tell it's going to be vicious. I put my hand up between us.

"That's enough." [Voice Richter scale: I don't care.]

His mouth stays open. KFCGull looks taken by surprise. And ugly, to tell the truth.

My chest burns like I've been stung by a million bees. The helium balloon of my heart is sinking fast. Something beautiful between us just went missing in action.

I turn my back and walk away.

4.

I don't actually notice that the donkey isn't braying until I turn the bend in the road and see it. It's standing with its head hanging over the fence, blissfully nuzzling up against another donkey, with a broken rope around its neck, that's standing on the other side of the fence.

It raises a love struck eye at me as I walk by, as if to say, "You see you stupid cow? This is what all the noise was about."

I can't figure out if I want to laugh or cry, so I do both.

There's a big car parked outside Black Swan Dream. It has a flat tyre. Big men in suits are battling to change it.

Geekboy's there, with his mobile phone. As I get closer I can hear what he's reading them. "The Mercedes manual says that 'you need shorter bolts to install a replacement tyre than the ones used on the original tyre'."

The guys – beefy muscle men – look totally fed up with him – skinny know-it-all MOgeek.

Geekboy literally does a little jig of excitement when he sees me.

"Guess who's inside?" he asks, and then answers his own question in the same breath, "The Minister of Education! She got a puncture outside, so she's inside having her weave fixed by Stylus while these guys act like they know how to fix the tyre."

He looks at the info on the screen of his mobile phone wistfully. "I keep trying to help, but they don't seem to be taking me too seriously."

Geekboy takes me by the arm and guides me into the salon.

The Minister of Education is talking on her cellphone. Or listening rather. Now and again she holds the phone away from her as the person on the other end gives her a loud earful.

Stylus is working on her weave, and right now the Minister's hair is all over the place. Her eyes keep darting desperately towards Stylus' motivational posters wallpapered on to the tunnel walls, like she needs all the help she can get!

"The thing is...." she says a few times, but everytime she gets interrupted.

She has a nervous tick in one eye.

"He hung up on me," she announces, bemused. "I don't know what I keep doing wrong....Oh, hello," she says, noticing me.

"This is Ndu," Stylus says, "the one we were telling you about earlier who has the idea for a Pocket School."

The Minister sits up straight in her chair. "Ah, I can't wait to hear all about it!"

What!? I look at Stylus and Geekboy in alarm, but they're both just nodding really calmly.

"Why don't you just play her the video, Ndu," says Stylus, ever so relaxed as she deftly weaves strands of hair. "Might be easiest."

Traitors!

The day I couldn't speak in the classroom, my mess up with the TV interview, KFCgull mimicking my voice so awfully, the memory of my 7.9 to 9.2 Voice Richter Scale rating when I made the Pocket School video – these all flash before my eyes. .

The Minister's eye tics madly.

Geekboy smiles encouragingly.

I think of the girl with the cellphone controlled toy car, take a deep breath, and push play.

“It's a school in a cellphone. One in everyone's pocket. It's zero-rated so it's free. And it's got a proper library, just like Yoza on Mxit, but with all the textbooks, and class notes, worksheets, old exam paper questions and answers.”

The Minister looks genuinely interested.

A jigsaw puzzle kicks into place. I don't need to hide behind my cellphone recording. And it doesn't matter if I have a shaky voice. I am completely worthy of being heard.

I turn the video off, put my cellphone down, and I tell her the rest of the plan in my own flawed, trembling voice, all the way to the very end.

[Richter Scale voice rating: Variable 4.3 to 8.7]

Stylus and Geekboy carry on, like speaking in public is something I do everyday.

“Very interesting,” says the Minister, as she taps some notes into her Blackberry. “We're doing a little of that on Mxit already you know.”

“But I’m sure you agree that doing a little is not nearly enough,” says Geekboy, in a pleasant enough voice.

The Minister’s eye ticks..

“Ok, that’s your weave all fixed up,” Stylus say.

The Minister settles her bill and we all walk out to the car..

“What! You still haven’t fixed it?” she screeches at her security guards.

“Look Minister, there’s no crisis, we’ve got it completely under control...” starts one of the muscle men..

“What do you mean there’s no crisis! My future depends on being able to get to the places I need to go. And that means I rely on you to make sure that everything’s working so that I can!”

“Millions know just how you feel,” Stylus says under her breath.

The Minister shoots her a look and Stylus smiles sweetly.

Geekboy has his mobile phone out again.

“The online Mercedes manual says you should have a biscuit wheel in the boot. If you put that on you can drive to the nearest Mercedes dealer and they’ll have the shorter bolts to put the proper spare tyre on for you.”

“Stop messing around and do what he says,” shouts the Minister. “Surely you could have planned ahead for this, or figured out a solution yourselves instead of wasting precious time. That’s your job, after all!”

Ten minutes later with the temporary wheel fitted, the Minister and her bodyguards drive away cautiously.

Her musclemen put on the car's official flashing blue lights, even though there's nobody about.

As the car limps past, both donkeys pull their lips back, and bray joyously. It sounds just like they're laughing their heads off.

"High fives," Stylus says with a grin.

Our palms slap, and I grin right back as we all walk back into Black Swan Dream.

5.

We're still celebrating when the mood does a u-turn.

Geekboy stiffens and when I look to see why I see Locust peek his head around the door. My heart starts to smash hard against my chest. Fear pumps through my whole body. The flashbacks push closer.

Stylus steps in front of me.

Geekboy pulls himself up to his full height and steps in front of her.

Locust holds up a Super Strikas comic.

"Issue #51," he says. "This is what I was trying to give you that day you ran away and jumped into the taxi."

I step out from behind Stylus and Geekboy and stare at Locust.

"Mthunzi had brought it to show me the day he....the day he died. I'm also a Super Strikas fan, and he'd told me about his whole collection. I've had it since then, but I've been wanting to give it back. I understand that you haven't wanted me anywhere near you though. I was just so relieved when I saw our Mxit Classified. I couldn't believe my luck."

Stylus puts her hand on my back.

"What happened that day was an accident," says Locust. "Mthunzi hadn't been hanging out with us for long, and he wasn't really part of the gang. There had been some guys who were picking on him after school, so he started hanging with us to get some muscle power behind him. Some safety in numbers."

Locust looks down at the ground, then up at me again.

“That bullet. It came from a rival gang. It wasn’t meant for Mthunzi. I think you know that but I wanted you to hear it from me. He counted on me to protect him, and I failed. I just wanted to tell you again that I’m sorry. I really am sorry.”

There’s a long, long silence. Eventually I walk over to Locust and take the comic from him. I hold it flat between my palms.

This, I don’t have words for. I can only nod. I don’t know what to say. I just hold on to issue #51. It’s as light as a feather, but it feels like it’s everything.

I leave the three of them standing awkwardly outside the salon. I just need to go home. Now.

Only when I get home do I realize that I’ve left my cellphone behind at Black Swan Dream. And I don’t actually care. Other than Stylus and Geekboy, the most important people in my life are right here. My mother has dinner waiting. She’s set a small table in front of the couch so we can all squash in and eat together. The TV is off. That’s all I need.

But before I sit down with them to eat, I quietly put issue #51 back in Mthunzi’s suitcase.

6.

Stylus swings by the next evening.

“Ndu, where’ve you been?!”

“I’ve just been here, at home.” [Voice Richter scale: 2]

“I’ve been messaging you endlessly. I even called you.”

“But I left my phone at your salon.” [Voice Richter scale: 4]

Stylus frowns. “No, it’s definitely not there.”

“What?” [Voice Richter scale: 6]

I really thought I’d left it on the counter. I could picture it there. But maybe I dropped it on the way home?

Stylus moves on fast.

“And the TV! Have you watched the TV?!!”

She’s hopping up and down in excitement as she talks.

“Bits.” [Voice Richter scale: 5]

“OMG Ndu! OMG! You don’t have DSTV do you?”

What is Stylus on?

“No...why?” [Voice Richter scale: 6]

“Come with me right now! We’re going to watch the TV at the spaza.”

“But I’m having a pajama day!” [Voice Richter scale: 7]

“Not anymore! Get your kit on!”

When we get to the spaza, with the twins in tow, there’s a small crowd gathered around the TV outside.. There’s an electric charge in the air.

“In breaking news, new local mozak sensation KFCgull is storming up the pop charts, racking up YouTube hits in Africa and across the globe. Quite remarkable for a teenage guy who has been busking on the side of the highway and only sings covers. But the YouTube numbers tell the story of his popularity!”

The crowd outside the spaza cheers for their brand new local hero.

The scene switches to *my* highway-side video he posted on YouTube.

“Stylus,” I groan, “I never got round to telling you. We broke up.” [Voice Richter scale variable: 5.3 to 8.9]

“Oh good,” she says, patting my arm without taking her eyes off the screen.

“He’s a dark horse, that one. So bad for you, too. Keep watching.”

The scene switches back to the TV presenter.

“But an even bigger local sensation is completely anonymous. Though we know her YouTube video was posted in the same vicinity as KFCgull’s, we have no idea who she is.”

Stylus is looking at me. I'm staring at the screen in disbelief.

My Glwmbgrl1 video plays silently on the screen as the TV presenter keeps talking! How?! I've never actually watched it, and I hadn't realized my face was pretty much invisible in the darkness. All that can be seen is the pink glow-in-the-dark t-shirt that Stylus gave me, my white teeth, and the outline of my hair, rising like flames out of my head, that show up against the pale corrugated metal wall behind me.

“Calling herself Glwmbgrl1, this brave girl delivers a hard-hitting message about the local state of education, with a mobile technology-based solution that seems to have struck a chord. Millions of young people in the developing world have posted and reposted the Glwmbgrl1 video on every social media network. Not only that, but Glwmbgirl1's video seems to have sparked something of a revolution! Literally hundreds of videos of young people copying her anonymous style – but voicing *their own* social problems and mobile technology based solutions – are being posted every hour. TV channels the world over are covering this remarkable story as it unfolds.”

The sound switches to my voice [Voice Richter scale variable: 6.2 to 10]. It's wobbly, but determined.

“That's you Ndu!” Veliswa says.

I look at Stylus in amazement.

“*You* did this!” [Voice Richter scale: 10]

She double takes.

“No, no, I didn't! I promise. I thought you must have?!”

“No, not me. I haven’t even had my phone.” [Voice Richter scale: 10]

The penny drops.

“It must have been Geekboy then! He’s the only other person I shared it with!” [Voice Richter scale: 10]

‘It wasn’t me,” says Geekboy.

I hadn’t even noticed him arrive.

“Seriously, I promise you it wasn’t!” Geekboy says, as I give him the ‘oh c’mon!’ look.

Somebody taps me on the shoulder. Locust!

I flinch when I see him.

“This is your cellphone,” he says, holding it out. “I heard you showing your video to the Minister of Education at the salon. I was behind the door and I listened to your whole Pocket School idea. I thought it was really amazing. It really could work!”

“It was *you*?! *You* did this Locust?”

We all stare at him. Locust looks terrified.

“Uh huh...yes. I hope you don’t mind. I just wanted to listen to it again – to show the rest of the boys, you know. I thought it might give them some...hope, actually.”

“So you *stole* her phone?!” Stylus says.

“In a way,” Locust says, his eyes shifting this way and that. “I always knew I was going to give it back. Then when I played it and I actually saw you on the video, Ndu, you know, glowing in the dark! With your hair like...flames! And you’d called it Glwmbgrl1! The perfect name! I just had this dream that it might go big. Like spark off a revolution, or something! So I thought I’d give it a go. I loaded it on YouTube. But I never actually really expected *this* to happen.”

Locust turns back to the TV screen. “Not like this...” he says in an awestruck voice. “The boys are like, waaaay impressed!”

We all turn back to the footage of the Glwmb. Dozens and dozens of us from all over the world. All of us in our lumo shirts, with hair like fire, and invisible faces and quiet voices, saying our bit. Putting it out to the world to listen.

Stylus pats Locust on the back and squeezes my arm.

“Ubuntu,” she says.

I nod. Uh huh. I’d been a nobody wanting to be somebody. And I’ve ended up being everybody.

The twins are hanging on to my legs, beaming.

I crouch down and hug them both tight to my chest. My heart feels like a huge hot air balloon, and we’re all inside it.

“I am what I am because of who we all are.” [Voice Richter scale: 0]

“Amen,” Locust says.

7.

That night, I glance across at my mother sitting on the couch and realize she's still staring slightly to the side of the TV. My heart sinks. But then I realize that although she looks sad around her eyes, she has a soft smile on her face, and she is still and peaceful. I follow her gaze and realize she's stuck up a photo of us all – exactly in that blank space she used to sit and stare at for tortured hours on end.

In the photo, Mthunzi is in the middle, playing the fool, of course. And we are all around him, smiling. She catches me looking at her, and smiles at me.

I sit up all night, so excited about Glwmbgrl1 I can't sleep. Geekboy is on the same vibe. So we just ride the wave and use Facetime to make a video about our mozak inventions, including clips from *my* YouTube video!

In this video we make sure our faces can be clearly seen in the video. And we add our names and contact details when we upload it on YouTube.

I go onto Facebook and post a link to it on Afrigadgets page.

I check my Facebook messages when the sky has turned that beautiful blue it goes just before the sun rises.

There is a message from Super Strikas!

"Dear Ndu. Thank you so much for all your messages. We apologise sincerely for the delay in getting back to you. Our bad. We have been supa busy in the office and on the field. The story of your brother Mthunzi really touched us. We are so sorry for your loss. And for our loss too, as we lost a great fan. Unfortunately we don't have a copy of issue #51 ourselves. It seems it has

become a collector's item. We are so sorry to not be able to help you with this. Please click on this link to take you to our latest online issue that we have literally finished this very hour and just put online. We've included a tribute to Mthunzi. We hope you like it. And we extend our heartfelt condolences to you and all your family. Please know that you are in our hearts and thoughts.

*With best wishes,
The Super Strikas Team"*

I click on the link and it opens to a page in the latest online Super Strikas comic.

There, on the page, is Mthunzi! He's on the soccer field, proudly wearing his Super Strikas kit. He has his fingers in his mouth, and he's whistling for the ball, perfectly poised to slam the ball into goal.

Outside, the birds start waking up. One whistles cheerfully outside and another answers. Two notes, one lilting up the scale to the next.

My hands are shaking with excitement as I read the whole Super Strikas issue on my phone. Mthunzi is the hero of the day! He is the one that scores the winning goal for the team!

I give up on sleep. And I can't wait to show my family. They'll be up soon anyway, but I can't wait that long! So I get up and boil the kettle and let it whistle before I pour the hot water into cups to make tea for my mother, and Milo for the twins.

I take them to them in bed, and let them wake up gently and then sip on their hot drinks slowly before I show them the comic. And I cue them in gently...I don't want anyone to get any surprises they can't handle. Even if it is a good surprise.

So we're all awake and on top of the world, reading the comic again and again, when my phone rings.

"Hi, is that Ndu?"

"Yes, speaking." [Voice Richter scale: 3]

"Ndu, I'm phoning from Afrigadget Headquarters. I saw the video you and Geekboy made, that you posted on Facebook a few hours ago!"

Dof, dof, dof goes my heart!

"Oh...and...did you like it?" [Voice Richter scale: 6]

"Like it? We loved it? I wanted to call you straight away but I figured it would only be polite to wait until a decent time to ring you! We're gearing up to launch 'Afrigadget TV', and we want to ask both you and Geekboy if you would be interested in being TV presenters on the show?"

"Hello? Ndu? Are you still there."

"Yes!" [Voice Richter scale: 10]

"And so? would you be keen to give it a go?"

Doubt kicks in.

"But do you think I'm the right person...you know, with my funny voice and everything?"

"We love how you both came across on the video. Very street and sussed, and young and passionate! Just *perfect!*"

“Well then....YES!” [Voice Richter Scale: 9.2]

And my voice does something particularly weird with that ‘YES’. I like it.
It’s never sounded stranger.

Word counts per chapter:

Episode 1

1. 704

2. 541

3. 591

4. 948

5. 994

6. 707

7. 991

Episode 2

1. 707

2. 542

3. 606

4. 359

5. 470

6. 935

7. 695

Episode 3

1. 838

2. 634

3. 684

4. 988

5. 464

6. 999 [Climax]

7. 809

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